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ABSTRACT

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ALTERNATE METHODS FOR ASSURING CREDIBILITY OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION FINDINGS IN PROJECT EVALUATION

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Alternative Methods for Assuring Credibility
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Always of interest to the educational researcher or evaluator as well as the consuming public is the credibility of information provided to decision makers. The value of information provided to impact the decision-making process is probably judged first and foremost by the extent to which it is deemed credible. Credible information is information which accurately estimates the parameters under investigation and which is obtained through a carefully and expertly designed and implemented study. An expertly designed and implemented study accounts for extraneous noise as much as possible and has built-in safeguards for assuring accurate analysis and reporting of the data. The purpose of this paper is to examine alternative ways of assuring credibility of evaluation information and to show the relative strengths and weaknesses of each.

With the advent of the ESEA Title I and other federally funded programs, educational research and evaluation has grown dramatically. This is particularly evident in the large urban school districts where competent research and evaluation departments now exist, while only a few short years before the research and evaluation effort in such settings was limited mostly to conducting testing programs.

Largely through the efforts of Title I evaluation reports, the nation was made aware of the plight of the "educationally disadvantaged" student in the United States. Such stunning disclosures of the failure of education to effectively reach all children left many questions unanswered. "Why can't Johnny read?" "How did our schools get in this mess?" "What can be done to improve the situation?" Out of this questioning period

came a new key word - accountability. Quickly championed by many, the main thrust of accountability was, and is, meaningful disclosure of school performance. Such an attitude created a demand for more evaluation data and information.

It was apparent to many, that if research and evaluation information was to be used, mechanisms needed to be established to assure the validity of the information reported. Some educators opted for evaluators to be independent from control of that which they were evaluating. Others argued that only an educational program audit similar to the fiscal audit used in business could assure valid evaluation information. Glass proposed a strong accountability model which included all aspects of accountability proposed up to that time. (Glass, 1972) According to Glass' plan, school districts were to disclose all information relative to performance. Then a comparative evaluation component would be established by which schools would be expected to devise alternative solutions to problems. Finally, such solutions would be designed along accepted research and evaluation guidelines with the entire efforts of the district monitored by an independent auditing agency.

Thus the public's demand for accountability in education has brought about the need for more valid information. It is the authors' contention that evaluators and auditors must do everything possible to assure valid information. Regardless of their best efforts the credibility of both evaluation and audit information is greatly effected by the locus of control of those doing the reporting. For example, the further removed the evaluator or auditor is from being controlled by those being evaluated the more likely the information is going to be viewed as credible. However,

greater credibility is gained at the expense of a loss of utility. Information with high utility is pertinent to the needs of the project manager for planning, controlling and evaluating the project. It must be reported in an easily manageable form and must be timely to the decision-making process. Locus of control can effect credibility and utility of information as will be shown by examining the role of the evaluator.

Probably the best example of the evaluator who is controlled by those being evaluated is the project evaluator who is part of the project team. Such a project team is usually controlled by a project manager who is often dependent upon project success for continued employment, or at least has a large degree of ego involvement. It is not too difficult to see how information provided by the evaluator, in spite of best efforts, is somewhat suspect. Yet the evaluator who is part of the project team produces information of the highest utility to the project manager, particularly if the project is, in part, producing a product such as a new curriculum. In the design mode, the fact that the evaluator is a participating member of the project team permits more relevant information collection, better project planning, and more rapid reporting of information. Thus, when the evaluator is directly controlled by those being evaluated a loss of credibility of evaluation information is hopefully offset by its high utility to the project.

In the large urban school systems of the United States, departments or branches for research and evaluation have evolved. These research and evaluation groups are generally not responsible for project management but for evaluation only. This removes the evaluator from control by the project manager. In this setting the evaluator is responsible for dual reporting of information -- to project management and higher level administration.

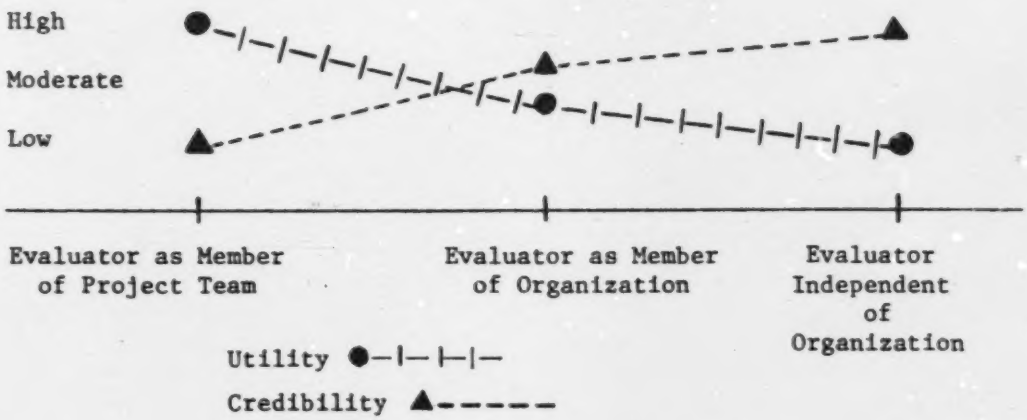
Since the evaluators continued employment is not dependent upon project success the evaluation information is viewed with a high degree of credibility. As was stated before, this high degree of credibility is obtained at the cost of a loss of utility. Removal of the evaluator from the project team will usually reduce the utility of the evaluation information. This most often happens because the evaluator is responsible for evaluating two or more projects and as a consequence commitment is divided. This becomes especially evident when the projects require extensive process evaluation. In the case of the department of research and evaluation supplying and controlling the evaluator, a great deal of credibility has been gained at the loss of some utility of information.

In many school districts and in nearly all statewide or nationwide projects, a consulting firm is contracted to perform project evaluation. It is felt that such total independence of the evaluator lends a great deal of credibility to the evaluation reports. This credibility is gained by a nearly total loss of utility of information, especially for the project manager. More will be said about the concept of external evaluator in a later section of the paper.

Figure 1 depicts what has been explained previously. As the locus of control of the evaluator moves from internal to the project to external from the organization, the utility for the project manager decreases while the general credibility of the evaluation information increases. This is assuming that the evaluator in each case is equally well trained to conduct research and evaluation in the public school setting.

Figure 1

Locus of Control of the Evaluator as it Relates to the Utility and Credibility of Evaluation Reports



The authors believe the problem of high utility-low credibility of information reported by the project controller evaluator prompted interest in the audit function mentioned earlier. The concept seemed reasonable. A firm or individual would be contracted to check and verify evaluation designs and reports. This would give the best of desirable outcomes -- information with high utility and high credibility. However, the audit concept had one assumption very basic to making it functional. The assumption is best stated by Jackson and Webster.

> The success of educational program auditing in improving educational evaluation and reporting at the local level is, to a great extent, dependent upon the machinery established at the state level to insure competent auditors are available with the necessary prerequisite skills in the required areas of educational research and evaluation, management systems, and measurement. If individuals who do not possess the prerequisite skills are permitted to sell themselves as educational auditors, the future of the concept is doubtful (1971, p. 4).

Where is the certification machinery to verify the capability of external auditors and evaluators? How effectively is it being used? At both the national and state level no established procedures exist for the certification of evaluators and in the state of Texas no certification procedures exist for auditors.

A lack of verification of capabilities of external evaluators and auditors presents a serious problem in regards to the credibility of information produced by such individuals. It is completely plausible that a poorly trained or incompetent external evaluator or auditor can produce highly suspect information simply through ignorance. It takes but very few exposures of such instances to greatly reduce the public's confidence in the concept of an external evaluator or auditor, and possibly of evaluation in general.

The authors would like to present a different version of the educational program auditor - the internal auditor. Such a concept is often used within business and industry to check the veracity of reports and operations in general. Such an individual or group should be hired by the highest person responsible for research and evaluation within the organization. The internal auditor should be certified as to possession of the essential competencies and trained in any areas shown to be deficient. The internal auditor should be completely independent of everyone possible within the organization, possibly responsible only to the highest officer in the organization. It is realized that the internal auditor would be faced with many problems while trying to function within an organization and yet remain independent and objective. There is one advantage the internal auditor would quickly have over any external auditor - knowledge of the organization or system.

A lack of knowledge, at least in large urban school districts, greatly reduces any effectiveness an external auditor might have, no matter how expert. Knowledge of the system allows data collection to be greatly expedited simply by knowing the various sources of information. It also provides one with the necessary power to either remove or bypass obstacles which always seem to get in the way of data collection and verification.

Figure 2 shows how combining an auditor with the evaluation function effects the utility and credibility of evaluation information. It assumes the present non-existent mechanism for verification of external auditors.

Figure 2

Utility and Credibility of Evaluation Information

		EVALUATOR		
		Member of Project Team	Member of Organization	External to Organization
AUDITOR	Internal	High Utility (a) High Credibility	High to Moderate Utility (b) High Credibility	Moderate to Low Utility (c) High Credibility
	External	High Utility (d) Moderate Credibility	High to Moderate Utility (e) Moderate Credibility	Low Utility (f) Moderate to Low Credibility

Because of the low utility of the information provided, the external evaluator (cells c and f) is not considered a valuable asset to the organization. However, as shown in Figure 2, an internal auditor working in conjunction with an external evaluator could improve the utility of information by forcing the evaluator to examine appropriate variables and

monitoring the implementation of the evaluation.

The difficulty an external auditor (cells d, e, and f) has functioning within an organization and the concomitant moderate credibility of information provided makes for a less than optimal component of the evaluation-audit process. This leaves the evaluator as a member of the project team (cell a) or a member of the organization (cell b) and the auditor internal to the organization as the only two acceptable loci combinations for auditor-evaluator. While both of these operational plans are acceptable the high cost of an internal evaluator (i.e., one evaluator per project) would, in many cases, prohibit this arrangement. Also, it is felt that, as a member of the project team, the internal evaluator might be pressured to investigate only those areas of the program which would be favorable to management. While the independent internal auditor would tend to correct this problem it is felt that an evaluator working external to the project but within the organization would have adequate freedom to pursue all reasonable lines of investigation. The utility of the information provided by this type of evaluator is rated from high to moderate and is a function of the work load placed on the evaluator. The information will be of high utility if the evaluator and support staff are assigned to one, rather than several, projects.

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